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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the fantasy literature that is currently available to young readers. Twenty-two children's books are listed and discussed under the following topics: good storytelling and lively imagination, recurring themes, satires and word play, original fairytales, and works that reflect the divided self, the occult, and parapsychology. It is suggested that the value of this type of literature is that it promotes creative, imaginative thinking in young readers, enabling them to consider alternative views of life. (RL)

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A LOOK AT THE MODERN FANTASY CURRENTLY AVAILABLE TO YOUNG READERS

BY

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No doubt about it, the impressions one gets and generalizations one comes up with about the contemporary offerings of modern fantasy for young people will be determined in large measure by the array of modern fantasies one reads and the particular attitude one has about fantasy or literature in general. The students of literature who have read the same books I have or who have read the many others which I did not read yet, may well arrive at a different, even contradictory set of impressions and generalizations. Whatever, this is what my glance at modern fantasy that is currently availavle to young readers looked like to me.

Typified by Good Storytelling and Lively Imagination. The works of two of the many writers of fantasy, namely Sylvia Engdahl and Mollie Hunter, might be cited to demonstrate that good storytelling and lively imagination (two basic characteristics of quality fantasy writing) are often found in the current offerings. In Kelpie's Pearls and The Haunted Mountain and in her other fantasies, too, Millie Hunter uses much of the Scottish legendery, her tales are suspense-filled struggles between good and evil and pertain to man's conquest of supernatural creatures. Stories by Sylvia Engdahl - This Star Shall Abide, Enchantress From the Stars and Beyond The Tomorrow Mountains to

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name but three of her excellent science fantasies, move with brisk momentum. Her stories are futuristic and portray planetary civilizations that endure after earth is doomed. Engdahl's concerned with individual motivation and ethical conduct and offers some depthy and provocative ideas about education for leadership.

Both Engdahl and Hunter use language beautifully. Not ornate language. In fact, they both speak in plain, forceful language which permits exciting thought-provoking experiences and evokes honest intense feelings from their readers. Mollie Hunter's dialogue and narrative style offer a cadence which easily leads one to believe s/he is living in Scotland, be it among the fisherman-crafters or the mountaineers. Engdahl is a deft writer, too. Although she offers much more detail about her settings and about the actions and feelings of her solid characters, one does not find that her writing is the least bit contrived or laborius. Both writers have a talent for choosing words and creating incidents which call into play sensory impacts and perceptions, making it possible for the reader to use his imagination spontaneously and also retain his imaginative creations long after the last page has been turned. The stories by Sylvia Engdahl and Mollie Hunter will be thought about, pondered over and savored because they are told so well.

Although the concepts of the cultures and the settings which are depicted in each of these stories may be totally removed from the experience of the readers, they are not beyond the range of their understanding and imaginings. The ways and means of the people who belong to these distant or strange cultures are so maticulously and graphically detailed that one has little or no difficulty transporting oneself to these unknowns. Young readers can accept without strain or inconvenience Mollie Hunter's invitation to visit the mountain populated by magical creatures (the blind ghost, the huge grey stone man who haunts the

mountain and guards its treasures) in The Haunted Mountain or mingle among the fisherman-crafters and learn what it is like to live through a fierce storm and meet a seal-man and evil person who pretends to be the lone survivor of a shipwreck as did Rob in A Stranger Came Ashore.

Recurring Themes. Writers of fantasy are addressing themselves to two recurring and conflicting themes. One is the awareness that human nature will keep people from wrecking themselves and the other is that people are in need of a model by which they will be led to improve themselves. Actually, these two themes have always prevailed in modern fantasy and the life and death struggle with demonic forces has often been the basis for exciting and imaginative stories. Those by two contemporary writers, Tom McGowen in The Spirit of the Wild and Ursula LeGuin in The Farthest Shore and A Wizard of Earthsea are no exceptions. McGowen's writing is characterized by an understated but effectice simplicity, whereas Ursula LeGuin's writing is sophisticated. Her plots are intricate, her language is ornate and her characters and legendary lands are given unusual names. Both writers involve their characters in perilous missions involving evil spirits who are choking, or have the power to choke the land and overpower the accomplishments of mankind. In The Spirit of the Wild, Amy, a young Wisconsin girl, bravely risked her life (but did not lose it!) and led the evil Weendigo to a trap where it would be imprisoned forever. Thus, she becomes a heroine who saves humanity from a savage and wild world in which the darkness of night is unbroken and filled with fearful terror, a world much uglier than our own which, as the author said, is a civilized world, often cozy and beautiful despite its problems, its wars and crime and pollution. Ged, the hero in Ms. LeGuin's novel The Farthest Shore, the last in her trilogy about about the magic lands of Earthsea, gives up his life in a successful effort to overpower the evil spirit that took its power from the sorcerress and dragon-lords and threathened to move all the inhabitants of Earthsea into a wasting mad-

ness that drew life into death and doom. Both of these fantasies offer grave discussions about life and death, love and courage, evil versus good. The one is far more sophisticated and profound in its commentary than the other, but both would probably be much enjoyed by young readers.

The writer who most artfully states in her themes that mankind will be saved from doom and destruction if it follows a model of goodness is Sylvia Engdahl. Perhaps a reference to Beyond The Tomorrow Mountains will better relay her views on how humanity can improve upon its human nature. As Noren, once a villager, is about to be initiated as a Scholor, the most distinguished group among the planetary civilization, he accepted these words in the Book of Prophecy: "So long as we believe in it (the Mother Star), no force can destroy us, though the heavens themselves be consumed." He asked that he and everyone else living on the Tomorrow Mountains hold fast to the teachings of the Mother Star. It is stated in the Book of Prophecy that the Mother Star is their source and their destiny, it is their life's bulwark. And so long as they believe in it, no force can destroy them. It is suggested in the Book of Prophecy that eventually people will find their own wisdom and choose their own law, but until then, they must follow the law and wait until the Mother Star itself becomes visible to them. This position is quite theological in its implications to say the least.

I think it is quite safe to say that there are a goodly number of writers of fantasy who suggest that neither of these postures about man's tendency toward good and evil is acceptable. They say instead that there must be a collaboration and mutual control of each disposition, that there exists a need for people to control or balance or establish a reconcilement of opposit or discordant qualities of human nature if they are to survive such disasters as the world fuel shortage, pollution, nuclear holocausts, over population and

cybernetics. (Unfortunately, most of the contemporary writers of fantasy focus on the decadent aspects of our society rather than on its attributes!) In The Pale Invaders, F. R. Kestavan explores the possibilities resulting from mankind's struggle between our impulses of good and evil. His statement of what the possibilities are when humanity is faced with disaster is both frightening and heartening; at best it is very thought-provoking. There are many interesting facets in The Pale Invaders. It is an attempt to warn young readers of what could happen if the projected world fuel shortage (oil especially, materializes. It is a dramatic portrayal of the turmoil one experiences when torn between the wish to know and a fear of what knowledge might bring. It is an emphatic statement that people can use their knowledge to accomplish things that are good (beneficial) and permit advancements and make life more pleasant and comfortable; it warns that they could use this knowledge to serve ends that would lead to unknown dangers and ultimately their destruction. Gerald, the hero of The Pale Invaders, is designated as the one person from his generation who is allowed to learn to read and write. Eventually, he explores the doubts, information and questions raised in the writings of Old Carz, one of the Founders of the communal society but who is eventually scorned and ostrisized by the others because they thought him an eccentric and a fool. The old man's writing is used to express one of Kestavan's messages: We must not allow machines and bombs and such like to shape our lives so that we are led to destroy what we have created. Machines, bombs, etc., can destroy us but they can help us too. We must make sure to use them to help.

Satires and Word Play. It is in the fancyful tales that one is likely to find satirical statements; some are refreshingly clever and humorous, others are biting and leaning toward the extremes of cynicism and irony. Proportionately, the number of humorous satires are very few; however, I consider Ellen Raskin

one of the most accomplished of the writers of this kind of fantasy. Of special worth is her surrealistic fantasy entitled Figgs and Phantoms, a 1975 Newbery Medal Honor Book. Things and happenings in this fantasy are seldom what they seem to be. In fact, when one has finished reading the book, one doesn't know if it is "a book about books, a book about dreams, a mysterious romance or a romantic mystery." Despite the author's play with words and the many fantastic situations (or is it because of them) the reader will quickly realize that something quite serious has been said: specifically, one should do a lot of living and learning and loving.

Another satire which I liked very much is Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang by Mordeca: Richler. I thought this was a marvelously clever satire about the catastrophic experiences of poor Jacob Two-Two when he is held prisoner in the lair of the Hooded Fang (a dreadfully insecure and incompetent tyrant). Readers young and old alike will enjoy the challenge of separating Jacob's dream life from the details of his difficult waking life. Mordeca Richler offers his readers a talented play on and play with words and he uses them to make a strong and all-too-true satirical commentary about life's pecking order. This is a clever story which will delight and jolt anyone who pays need to what the author says and how he says it.

Original Fairytales. I suspect that the kind of fairytales that John Gardner has created in his three small anthologies entitled, Dragon, Dragon, Gudgekin the Thistle Girl, and The King of The Humming Birds is not indicative of a trend in the true sense of the word, yet it is a "happening" in this contemporary scene worth noting. Gardner's fairytales are a new and welcome deviation of the traditional fairytale form. I am not saying that they can nor even that they should replace the more established form of fairytale. In

each of his fairy tales he offers an array of offbeat heros, heroines and villains. Like the classical fairytales, his stories are about wizards, witches, princes, dragons, giants, gnomes, magic forests and haunted castles. They are unlike them in that not only is the humor in them dry and wry and the use of the language sophisticated but both good and evil come out as victors. In "The Griffin and the Wise Old Philosopher" from Gudgekin The Thistle Girl, Richler suggested that the best solution to the most perplexing questions often lies in total ignorance. One of his most unique stories is "The Last Piece of Light" in Dragon, Dragon. Chimorra, a chimney girl (a dreadfully simple person!) forgets the magic formula which will bring the return of the last light to the darkened world. When a miser complains to a one-eyed man, "I'll tell you the truth, I'm sick to death of this cold and dark. A man can't count properly in this confounded gloom.") His utterance of the word "gloom" triggers to her memory the magic formula. Gloom is here, Gloom is there. I am a friend of the Lady of the North Star. There is a good fairy in this story and she is called the Lady of the North Star. She is short-tempered, sharp tongued; actually she is a bit of a wench. For example, when Chimorra was having trouble remembering the magic formula, the Lady of the North Star bites her lip and says to herself, "Think, you little idiot." When Chimorra finally remembers the magic formula, the Lady of the North Star races to the Prince who has in his possession the locket which contains the last piece of light and was given to him by Chimorra so he would remember their nights together. The Lady of the North Star whispers crossly into his ear, "Open up the locket, stupid. Why do you think she gave it to you?" The Prince opens the locket and out bursts the last piece of light in the world. It glances off the mirror, grows larger, bounces off the Prince's jeweled decked crown, on to the chandelier, the waters of the castle moat, each time growing larger and

larger and eventually the whole world hums with light.

The Divided Self, The Occult and Parapsychology. There is a rash of stories about the supernatural, the occult and the divided self. Often they tend to move in the direction of the grotesque and seldom do they offer any fun or humor. The poltergeist in The Almost Year by Florence Randall the The Headless Cupid by Zylpha Snyder are evil spirits who cause and reflect the turmoil, hostility and fear that exist among the child protagonists and other members of their families. One finds a lot of action and mood and suspense artfully created by John Bellaire in his trilogy: The House With a Clock in Its Walls, A Figure in The Shadow and The Letter, The Witch and The Ring. Strange things happen in his stories; usually the magic is evil and his young hero and heroine are believable down-to-earth individuals. Although his tales about the battle of good against evil are eerie, they do offer some amusing scenes. This is definitely not so in the stories by Snyder and Randall or most other authors who write fantasy about the divided self, the occult or parapsychology.

The fantasies by Robert Newman, William Sleator and Barbara Freeman, demonstrate how writers use fantasy as a means by which to comment about or share their insights on their theories of human psychology and motivation. Robert Newman makes use of parapsychology in Night Spell. The hero and heroine in this mystery story find answers to their questions and help others find happiness when they are contacted in their dreams and in their waking hours too, by another child, a girl, who lost her life a year before. She drowned when the boat she and her mother were in capsized during a bad squall.) Another deceased person from the past (this one is a distant relative of the heroine and one who looked just like her) is the spirit who communicates with the heroine of The Other Face by Barbara Freeman. William Sleator is a master at creating moods

of suspense and horror. His unique fantasies depicting psychological confusions and tensions are downright chilling or more properly described, perhaps, as jarring. Among The Dolls is about Vicky, an unhappy girl living in a home filled with strife and hostility. When she is given an antique dollhouse fully equipped with tiny dolls and minature furniture, she proceeds to engage in role playing, dramatizing the strife and hostility that exists in and among the members of her family. Suddenly she not only finds herself in the dollhouse, but she is shrunken to doll size and is kept prisoner by the family of dolls she played with. All ends well, for Vicky does manage to escape, she returns to her own size and gains some worthwhile insights about herself and her parents. This talented young writer also offers some provocative psychological insights in House of Stairs. This is a story about five sixteen year-old orphans involved in a thought-control experiment. Only two of the young people are able to resist the behavior modification techniques used upon them; unfortunately, three succumb and must be treated in order to counteract the vicious effects of the experiment. These are not pretty stories. In fact, the cruelty (mental as well as physical) that is portrayed is more than slightly disturbing. Why do children (and adults) read macabre stories like these. Or those about the occult or parapsychology? One critic suggested that this kind of story brings excitement to what may be a humdrum existence, that these stories might even cause one to appreciate the calmness and the ordinariness that ones life offers. They are enjoyed, in the very imaginativeness they evoke. To some extent, they offer an antidote to the prevailing materialism and the tendency for many people today to honor things, to manipulate them or possess them above human values and intuition. They can be "mental can openers", too, in that they stimulate curiosity, cause us to conjecture about things we

don't yet have answers or may never be able to explain or account for.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

There is no lack of fantasies for young people. Some of it is well written, much of it is not. I focused on those I thought were most imaginative, were characterized by accomplished and artistic craftsmanship and contained prevailing themes or messages pertaining to unknown worlds or the real world that are of concern to a large number of people in our society today. I did not address myself to weaknesses or even the symbolism or the abstractions they might contain. I think what young people do with literature, how they use it, if you will, is primarily personal. Few young people are literary sophisticates. In fact, most are really quite naive in their attitudes and uses of literature. They can distinquish between life and literature but literature does help them find some answers to their questions about and problems involving them in the real world. By way of the literature experience, by identifying with the feelings, needs and responses of the characters they meet in the fanciful stories they can learn to judge between the real and the unreal, the true and the false because the literature gave them the chances to experience both. It is not necessary to concern children with the "significance" or the "symbol" present in the literary piece. But so often this is the kind of analysis that the literary critics focus upon when responding to fanciful fiction. Children are not interested in the realm of minute particulars. Their attitude is an unselfconscious and uninhibited involvement and identification. They are not interested in what Saul Bellows called "deep reading". To

paraphrase him, he said: "Let soda crackers be soda crackers (not the Host) and wood shaving, wood shavings (not shavings from Stephen's Cross). They are mysterious enough as it is."[1] This simplicity does not mean that the young readers are capable of only narrowness. If the fantasies are really literary works of art (and I tried to identify some that I thought came fairly close to just that), the readers will eventually go out from the personal meanings to the abstractions. They will recognize that these abstractions are actually found in the great fanciful literature they have read and enjoyed. These abstractions are part and parcel of the great humanities themes which are searched for and dealt with in all literature - the realistic and the fanciful fiction and the prose and poetry. Young readers might not be able to verbalize their recognition of the significance or symbol of a literary piece but they do <u>feel</u> it. Perhaps that is quite enough, or perhaps it isn't even worth bothering about, as Saul Bellows suggested.

Lloyd Alexander said one time that fantasy is a literary way of dramatizing the "what if's". If by reading fantasy such as I described our young people develop the habit of thinking in terms of "what if", they will be more capable of thinking in terms of alternatives or options, they will be less inclined to depend upon certainty-type explanations to their questions. If by the reading of fantasy they have indeed acquired this style of thinking, they are bound to be more flexible people, more curious people, and more capable of coping with the unforeseen and unpredictables that life has in store for them. This kind of "what if" reading and thinking will help young people experience the pleasure that comes from mind-stretching thinking rather than literal or gullible thinking.

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1. Saul Bellows, "Deep Readers of The World, Beware!" <u>New York Times Book Review</u>, February 15, 1959

The best thing that can happen from reading fantasy is that it permits one to stretch his imagination and enjoy the private vision, the creatings of ones own images. An accomplishment unique to humans and an accomplishment that can be realized if we make these fine fantasies accessible to children.

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